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From the Diary of a High School Teacher of German.

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An Address Delivered Before the Modern Language Association of Ohio.

What I wish to offer you, ladies and gentlemen, is not an exhaustive paper on some special subject, but rather a few and somewhat disconnected observations, drawn from practical experience, which, though not entirely new, will certainly admit of discussion. I shall base my remarks upon notes which I have jotted down in my diary as time and occasion prompted me.

To begin with, I find frequent reference to the withdrawal of high school pupils during the first year. A committee appointed by the National German-American Teachers' Association has gathered very interesting statistics.*) According to this report there are in the United States 4946 institutions where German is taught, the total number of pupils studying German being 601,172. 739 high schools are represented with 45,670 students pursuing courses in German. Many rejoice at so large a number of students, inferring that there is a growing tendency to speak German in this country. This is a mistake. Such a large enrolment does not disprove the fact that German as a spoken language is on the wane, for, if father and mother used German exclusively at home, the child would not have to seek German instruction in school. Moreover this number — 45,670 — of high school pupils studying German includes all those who withdraw during and after the first year. We have had in Springfield in the year ending August 31, 1899, in the D Grade a total enrolment of 181, a withdrawal of 99. On inquiry I find that this state of affairs is not confined to Springfield, but is a general feature. There is usually a loss of at least 25% in the first year class. Cincinnati in the year ending August 31, 1898, had in the D Grade of the high school a total enrolment of 1106, a June enrolment of 852, consequently a withdrawal of 254. Columbus for the same year in the same Grade had a total enrolment of 831 and a withdrawal during the year of 219. Cleveland has in the first high school year 1292, in the second 877, 415 less. Of course the German Department gets its share of the large number of withdrawals. Springfield high school had enrolled September, 1898, 100 German beginners, in June, 1899, only 55; in

*) Der gegenwärtige Stand des deutschen Unterrichts in den Schulen der Vereinigten Staaten. Herausgegeben von dem Deutschamerikanischen Lehrerbund.

Youngstown there were in the first year of high school instruction in German in Sept. 20, in June, 10.

What is the cause of this unusually large number of withdrawals?

Superintendent H. B. Williams, president of the superintendents' section of the Ohio Teachers' Association, says in his inaugural address*): "This shrinkage is produced by a number of causes, some of which are due to deficiencies in the pupil and others, to a failure to adapt the high school system to the needs of beginners." Although I agree with most of the propositions that Mr. Williams makes in his paper, I should certainly modify his statement regarding the causes of shrinkage. The fault does not lie in the high school course of study, but in the kind of pupils brought to the high school by the machinery of the system. It is a well-known fact that not all pupils enter the high school with the intention of staying. For many the high school is but a temporary abode until they can find employment, some remain but one month. Such pupils are only a hindrance to the real student and a burden to the teacher, who will find the elementary instruction in a language difficult enough without being hampered by this dead weight.

The shrinkage is but a natural consequence of the overcrowding of the first year's class, owing to indiscriminate admission.

This leads me to another point, to which I see frequent reference in my diary, the lack of preparation, so evident in those who take up high school work. I have taught beginners' classes in both German and Latin, and I find that a considerable number of those admitted to high school and allowed to take up a foreign language in the first year are unable to do good work in either, because of lack of sufficient grammatical information. Pupils have the greatest difficulty in distinguishing parts of speech. Again and again we find pupils entering the high school who are ignorant of the very rudiments of grammar, for which the grammar school should be held responsible. This point strongly suggests to me the necessity of raising the standard of admission to high school. The study of German will then give the pupil a better knowledge of the essentials of his own language. A student can understand the structure and spirit of a language better when he has a standard of comparison. By studying a foreign language he will learn more about the grammar of his own.

Another question which calls for discussion is: "What should be done with pupils who have studied German in the lower grades and wish to continue it in the high school?" In Springfield we try to meet the wants of such students by organizing separate advanced classes, but I sometimes cannot help wishing that they had never received any instruction in German before. Especially objectionable are those who have been taught to speak the language after a fashion and imagine that a thor-

*) See Home and School, July and August, 1899, p. 237 ff.

ough knowledge of grammar is unnecessary. In the eighth grade composition work is prescribed, i. e., reproduction of short stories, fables, letters, change of poetry to prose, but I have yet failed to find the pupil who could write a German letter. On the contrary, I find in many cases that he has derived but little benefit from the German instruction below the high school. Some have studied German four or five years, but are not able to conjugate: *ich habe*; they all claim never to have heard of strong and weak declension; they know a few German phrases; they can generally read nicely, but as soon as you stop them and ask that biblical question: *Understandest thou what thou readest?* their ignorance will astonish you. Pupils tell me that they never have been required to translate a German sentence in the grammar school, the main aim in their training having been a correct and fluent pronunciation, but does that take five years?

Translation is the surest means of detecting of half knowledge. Nevertheless I am in full harmony with those who aim at doing away with all translation, but I do think it entirely out of place to do that at the very beginning of German instruction. To get rid of the translation should be the goal that the teacher ought to have constantly in view, but he will perhaps reach it in the last year of high school instruction, not before.

As far as a knowledge of grammar is concerned, I must treat pupils entering the high school after having studied German for four or five years as though they were mere beginners in the subject.

But I do not mean to advocate abolishing all German instruction in the grammar school. Since there are many who will never go to high school, it would not be right to deprive them of German instruction. However, according to the recent Report of the Committee of Twelve on Modern Languages, it is "not worth while as a rule that a pupil takes up the study of German in the primary grades unless he has at least a prospect and an intention of going on through the secondary school."

But my main reason for thinking it would be a mistake to postpone the subject of German till the children reach the high school is, because in childhood the organs of speech are still in a plastic condition, and practical education in living languages should therefore commence as early as possible, say at the age of 8 or 9 years. On this point all the prominent educators agree. The French boy**) begins to study a foreign language at the age of eight years, the Swedish child begins the first foreign language, generally French, at the age of 8, the second, usually German, at the age of 10, and the third, English, at the age of 12. Why should not the study of German be a help to the American pupil in mastering the difficulties of English grammar?

Furthermore, with reference to our teachers of German, permit me to ask, "How many of them are masters of their subject? How many

*) p. 1406.

**) Report Com. Ed. 95—96. Vol. II, p. 981.

of them are able to use idiomatic German? What is generally considered a satisfactory preparation? Is not that person the successful candidate for a position as German teacher who is a client of a man whose political influence is great? If there is a vacancy, a member of the board or a party boss tries to put in a good friend, a relative, who has perhaps just left the high school or who has not even found it necessary to take the German course offered in the high school, depending entirely on the knowledge gained at home from father and mother. Often no question is raised concerning the efficiency of such a teacher, he or she is sometimes elected and subsequently put *pro forma* through an examination, the sole purpose of which is to give the teacher the necessary certificate.

Another very urgent question is that of the text book. While the instruction does not depend entirely on the book used, still a good book is a good help. What books are used with beginners' classes in the high school? Are they designed to create Sprachgefühl? I was very much gratified to find in the above mentioned report of the Committee on Modern Languages the following statement:

"The recitation of paradigms, rules and exceptions is always in danger of degenerating into a facile routine in which there is but little profit. It used to be thought and perhaps some teachers and text-book makers still think, that anything grammatical will do for teaching grammar."

A book which I consider more of a hindrance than a help in the acquisition of a Sprachgefühl is Collar's shorter Eysenbach; but what can one do to get rid of this or any other unsuitable book as long as the free text-book system exists? Owing to this wretched system, a change of text-books is almost impossible. The best we can do under present circumstances is to proceed with extreme caution whenever the choice of a text-book is left to us. The Grammar to which I should give preference is that of Calvin Thomas.

Another question about which I should like to give my personal opinion is, whether Latin or a modern language should come first in the high school course. Although the recent Report on Modern Languages says, "This is one of the questions upon which it is just as well not to dogmatize" I firmly believe, that Latin is better adapted for drill work in grammar than German, and hardly more than drill work can be accomplished in the first year. Experience has taught me that pupils who have had one year of Latin can make much better progress in German than those who have never studied Latin at all. I find that pupils who choose German as their second language can finish Collar's shorter Eysenbach and read the two volumes of Guerber's Maerchen in one year, which is as much as one can reasonably expect.

Taking all things into account, I venture to say that pupils who

*) p. 1414.

have studied Latin can accomplish more in German than those who have never had any Latin.

If German instruction began in the second high school year instead of the first it would be to the advantage of the German Department. The immediate result would be a loss in quantity but undoubtedly a gain in quality. In Toledo 148 pupils take up German in the first year, while only 10 begin the subject in the second year. If German were postponed until the second year, we should get better classes, for our pupils could then exercise more judgment in their choice of subjects. Besides, such pupils would be more likely to finish their course. I take as an example the Cleveland Central High School, where of 99 pupils who began German in the second year only nine withdrew; the same proportion exists in almost all high schools.

In conclusion I wish to call attention to the question of promotion. It is possible to enter many high schools without an examination. Pupils are passed from one grade to another upon their teacher's estimate; some come to high school "on trial", but I have never yet heard of a pupil's being sent back to the 8th grade. At present there seems to be a tendency to be as lenient as possible in making promotions in order to induce him to return the following year, which he would not do if compelled to take the year's work over again. Naturally parents like to see their children promoted year after year and an indulgent system of promotion is therefore very popular.

Perhaps the bad effects of such a system are not so apparent in other subjects as they are in language study. Every effort is made to induce the pupil in the grammar school to go to high school, and here in turn he is encouraged to finish the whole course. The authorities point with pleasure to a large high school enrolment and with pride to a great number of graduates. The average graduate of an American high school is of about the same age as the average graduate of a German gymnasium; but that is about all that is common to both. In Germany the authorities are satisfied when out of 700 pupils attending a gymnasium 12 graduate each year on an average, but here they do not consider their system perfect unless they have out of an enrolment of 700 at least 100 graduates.

Nobody seems to care for the scholarship of high school graduates; the diploma given them is for many nothing but a certificate of their four years' attendance. The great majority of high school graduates do not go to college, but if a greater number of them would continue their education in higher institutions, the weak point in high school instruction would be more generally known. As it is, only the few good ones that are found in every class go on, and the majority is satisfied when they can show callers their framed high school diploma, which does not say a word about their scholarship.

Numbers weigh with the American citizen, and numbers only. While

this desire for large numbers is not to be entirely condemned, since the high schools have hitherto depended upon numbers for support, it would be just as well to pay taxes for the few that are mentally better endowed. Tax-payers should be willing to pay something for the training of superior brains.

If the American public wants a "People's College" it should accustom itself to seek compensation, not in numbers, but in the advantage which the commonwealth may derive from those who are really benefited by a rational high school system.

Grossmütterlein.

1. In die stille Kammer gleitet
Trauter Abendschein;
Müd' nach kleinen, schlichten Bildern
Schaut Grossmütterlein.
2. Lichte Bilder von den Wänden
Lächeln hier herab,
Dunkle zwischen welken Kränzen
Locken dort zum Grab.
3. Seufzend, sinnend sitzt die Alte. —
Nun sie wieder strickt. —
Mählich, mondenscheinumflossen,
Ruht sie — träumt — und nickt.
4. Lautlos sinkt ihr Garn zu Boden.
Still wird's im Kamin.
Wie sie lächelt! Holde Geister
Sie wohl leis umzieh'n.

H. G. Noelling.